

May 3, 2012
Statement
Bill C-38 (Budget Implementation)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP):

Mr. Speaker, there are many things about Bill C-38 that I could speak about, such as the total rewriting of Canada's environmental protection law, repealing the Fair Wages and Hours of Labour Act, raising the age of retirement to 67, the elimination of the National Council of Welfare, the elimination of employment equity for federal contractors, weakening the Auditor General, having cabinet-approved pipelines rather than the arm's length National Energy Board and the gutting of the regional employment insurance appeal process. However, as the only member of the opposition from the three northern territories, I will speak about how the bill would change the three acts that could be considered the constitutions of the three territories without having consulted the people of the north.

Clauses 214, 215 and 216 of Bill C-38 would amend the Northwest Territories Act, the Yukon Act and the Nunavut Act. They would amend these acts to give the federal cabinet the ability to make more regulations governing the fiscal capacity of the three territories. Instead of moving toward the Conservatives' promise of improving and devolving northern governance, which is the fourth pillar of the Prime Minister's much-promoted northern strategy, these amendments would actually increase the amount of control Ottawa would exercise over the three territories. There is no provision to ensure that the three territorial governments would have any input or that there would be any measure of consultation or approval over the nature of these regulations or any changes made to them by future federal cabinets. This is hardly responsible government for the territories.

All of us who use the Westminster system of democracy know the key to responsible government is having control over fiscal matters. These amendments completely make a mockery of any statements from the Conservatives that they believe in consulting with and building a better north.

In the past Parliament, I tried to lessen the intrusiveness of the federal government over the people of the north. Over and over, I spoke to northern leaders and my constituents and then presented a bill that would give more certainty and control in the Northwest Territories over their fiscal capacity. It was to be achieved through actual legislation.

Speaking to my bill at committee, Mr. Chris Forbes, the assistant deputy minister, Federal-Provincial Relations and Social Policy Branch, Department of Finance, described how the borrowing limit provisions were a holdover from when the only

institution the territories could borrow from was the Government of Canada. Since 1983, the territories have been able to borrow on the open market. Colonial at the start and colonial it continues under the Conservatives.

My bill was well supported across the Northwest Territories.

If the Conservatives had consulted with the people in the north, they would have heard that what northerners wanted was this federal control over borrowing removed. So far we have not been any consultations on these amendments, unless they have been done in secret. They exclude Canadians because they do not care what Canadians have to say about many of these aspects.

The Prime Minister has made a point of stressing the growth of governance in the territories. If that is what he wants, then the Conservatives should have done the right thing in amending these three acts, and that is to take the federal government and the federal Department of Finance completely out of the process.

Where are the members for Yukon and Nunavut on these changes? Do they support increased control over the territories by Ottawa? Is it okay with them that the legislative assemblies of the territories lose autonomy with these changes? Why the silence?

The people of the north have proven they can govern themselves. They have proven they are capable managers of money. Moody's Investment Services has given the Northwest Territories an Aa1 rating. This rating is second highest and places the NWT in line for credit risk with most of the provinces.

Moody's rating takes into account recent developments related to the Deh Cho Bridge project.

The credit opinion notes that Moody's:

"...had already included the Deh Cho Bridge liability in our calculations of the NWT's net direct and indirect debt, reflecting the government's debt-like obligation to make periodic availability payments. As such, formal assumption of the related debt is not expected to alter the NWT's credit profile in a material way."

According to Moody's, the rating reflects:

"...prudent fiscal policies that have, over the past several years, limited debt accumulation. A well-developed fiscal framework (including a Fiscal Responsibility Policy which guides the NWT's fiscal policies and use of debt) should help to ensure that the debt burden remains low and affordable."

The NWT's fiscal responsibility policy mandates how the NWT may borrow. The policy guides the GNWT fiscal policy and use of debt and includes guidelines respecting the

types of activities for which debt can be issued, as well as limits on total debt and debt servicing costs to ensure affordability. A borrowing plan is required to detail options and preferred choices for funding the short-term and long-term borrowing requirements of the government at minimum cost.

Our territory is responsible. It is acting in a manner which many other provinces should emulate.

However, these amendments do not treat the territories as responsible. Instead, they treat them in a paternalistic, uncaring fashion, without any concern what northerners think about changing their constitutions.

The people of the north have the same political rights as Canadians who live in the provinces. History has given us a designation as territories rather than provinces, but regardless what we are called, changes to our laws in Parliament should make northerners more equal to other Canadians instead of less.

All three territories are anticipated to be the great growth area of our great country. Northerners say "Respect us, treat us as equals, don't make us come cap in hand to Ottawa to be treated in a manner that other Canadians take for granted".

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees all Canadians a right to a legislative assembly. It guarantees all Canadians that rights are held equally and that Canadians are treated equally by laws. These amendments do not move our legislative assemblies closer to equality with the provincial legislatures. These amendments actually move the northern legislatures further from equality.

Through a long and arduous process and negotiations on this issue over three years, my government was never told that the Minister of Finance would create these new powers for the federal cabinet.

Is the Conservative government so insensitive that it thinks it can now operate by decree?

A process that started as government-to-government negotiations has ended up as laws from master to vassal. Shame on this process that is blind to the desire of all northerners for equality, for respect and for their own political rights in our great country.